

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT

Crisis and Sensitive Moment Playbook

What to do in the four hours nobody planned for. Written calmly, in advance, because the alternative is deciding these things badly while a notification count rises.

THE DECISION THIS TEMPLATE PROTECTS

Whether this is a crisis, who owns it, and what the brand says in the first hour.

ROLE

Social Media Management
 · owned jointly with the client

COURSE PLACEMENT

Main Course Module 5 ·
Execution risk management

REVISION

Version 1.0
Current as of 19 August 2026

Complete this at the start of every engagement and review it every six months. It should take ninety minutes and you will hope never to use it. The pause list in section two is the single most useful thing in the document, because scheduled content publishing during a serious moment is the most common avoidable error in this discipline.

BEFORE YOU START, YOU NEED

- Names and phone numbers for the client's decision makers, including out of hours.
- Access to pause every scheduled queue.
- An agreed definition of what counts as a crisis for this organisation.

01 Is this a crisis?

Most bad moments are not crises. Treating an angry customer as a crisis is expensive; treating a crisis as an angry customer is worse.

LEVEL	DEFINITION	OWNER	FIRST RESPONSE TIME
Noise	Isolated criticism, no spread	Community manager	Standard
Elevated	Repeated or spreading, no harm alleged	Account lead	Within two hours
Serious	Harm alleged, a named person involved, or press interest	Client decision maker	Within one hour
Severe	Safety, legal, regulatory or a genuine failure	Client leadership and legal	Immediate

02 The first fifteen minutes

1. **Pause every scheduled queue on every platform.** Do this first, before assessing anything. It is reversible and costs nothing.
2. Pause paid campaigns whose creative could read badly against the moment.
3. Establish the facts you actually know, separated from what is being said.
4. Classify the level using the table above.
5. Notify the named owner for that level by phone, not by message.
6. Start a written log with timestamps. Somebody will ask later what was known and when.

WHERE THE PAUSE SWITCHES ARE, AND WHO HAS ACCESS

Fill this in now. Finding out during an incident is how the wrong thing gets published.

03 What the brand says first

SITUATION	FIRST STATEMENT SHOULD	SHOULD NOT
We got it wrong	Acknowledge, state what is being done, give a time for more	Explain, justify, or blame a process
Facts are unclear	Say we are establishing the facts, give a time	Speculate or deny prematurely
The criticism is unfair	Usually say nothing publicly yet	Argue in replies
Somebody was harmed	Address the person, not the audience	Lead with the brand's position
A tragedy unrelated to us	Say nothing, pause everything	Post a statement nobody asked for

Silence is a legitimate and frequently correct choice. The pressure to say something within the hour usually comes from inside the organisation, not from the audience.

04 Sensitive moments that are not crises

National tragedies, disasters and periods of public mourning. The brand's job is to be absent, not to participate.

SITUATION	ACTION	WHO DECIDES
National tragedy or disaster		
Death of a public figure		
Period of mourning or observance		
A crisis affecting our own sector		

05 Contacts

ROLE	NAME	PHONE	OUT OF HOURS?
Client decision maker			
Client legal			
Client communications			
Our account lead			
Who can pause all queues			

06 Afterwards

STEP	OWNER	BY WHEN
Timeline of what happened and when it was known		

STEP	OWNER	BY WHEN
What we would do differently		
What in the protocol failed		
Content queue reviewed before restarting		

JUDGMENT PROMPTS

1. Can you pause every queue in under five minutes, right now, without asking anyone?
2. Does your escalation list contain phone numbers of people who will answer?
3. Have you agreed with this client what silence looks like, and who is allowed to choose it?
4. In the last incident anywhere in your portfolio, what actually went wrong: the response, or that nobody had decided in advance?

WHAT THIS TEMPLATE WILL NOT DO FOR YOU

- It will not prevent a crisis. It prevents a crisis being made worse by improvisation.
- It is not legal or public relations advice. For serious matters, both are needed and neither is you.
- It goes stale. Contact details rot within months. Review it every six months and check the numbers.

THE DEFENSIBLE OUTPUT

A completed playbook with live contact details, tested pause access, and an agreed definition of what counts as a crisis for this client.

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